

Is The Christian Required To Do Works? (Part Four)

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As the first article in this series explained, the Bible clearly states that the Christian is required to do good works. The devastation sin has caused through wars, adultery, murder, deceitful conspiracies, greed, disobedient children, multitudes of false religions, and churches in doctrinal disarray proves that humanity has failed miserably. The fruit of mankind's rebellion against God and His way is worldwide in scope. This activity is surely leading to the crisis at the close of this age, which will climax with Christ's return.

The most serious aspects of this continuing rebellion are located within the "Christian" Western world. They are most serious for us because we are most responsible. None of the rest of the world has had such extensive exposure to God's Word. Our nations above all others should know better. Jesus plainly says in Luke 12:48, "For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required; and to whom much has been committed, of him they will ask the more."

The destruction of life can be stopped only one way: by ceasing to sin. Sin is the transgression of the law (I John 3:4). If sin is not stopped, because God is just, those laws will execute their power to destroy. God would not be just if He did not punish for sin. He would simply be like many parents today who yell at their children, perhaps threaten, but never carry through. Their words are hollow, but God's Word is true and never fails.

How, then, can we escape what is surely coming? God's Word prophesies that man will not only not stop sinning, but will blaspheme the God of heaven even in the face of His powerful punishments designed to bring them to repentance (Revelation 16:8-11)! Most of mankind will have to be forced to stop sinning through death and then raised in a resurrection into a better world later on.

Is there anything we can do now? As shown in the last article, the power to quit sinning lies in one's relationship with God. However, a person cannot access God for a relationship unless he repents and is justified by faith in the sacrificed blood of Jesus Christ. Many times and in several different ways, the Bible states the obvious truth given in Leviticus 17:11: "For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement for the soul." Jesus Christ voluntarily sacrificed His life so that we might have forgiveness and access to God.

Romans 5:1-2 confirms this process: "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God." Justification acquits us and thus brings us into alignment with the legal standard God has established for access to Him. This, then, allows a relationship with Him to begin.

Justification absolutely cannot be earned based on any work or any combination of works of an already sinful man. In this relationship, justification is a standing that must be given as a gift of God due to the perfect works of another, Jesus Christ. Of all who have been born, only He can present a sacrifice of sufficient value to provide us with atonement. Our gracious Creator then freely accounts Christ's righteousness to those who believe and repent. Romans 4:1-5 corroborates this:

What then shall we say that Abraham our father has found according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness." Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness. . . .

Only Christ's sacrifice and God's grace are sufficient to provide justification.

Along with a multitude of other verses, Ephesians 2:8-10 makes it abundantly clear that, though works do not save a person, they are nonetheless required by God:

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God. Not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

Since works are required, understanding this aspect of the works issue comes down to comprehending *when* they are required and the *reasons* God requires them. While being called of God and led to faith in Jesus Christ and repentance toward God, every person is performing some measure of work to reach those states. We are, after all, called upon to present fruit fit for repentance even before being baptized! We work to bear fruit that provides evidence that we believe God by turning toward giving our lives to Him.

As a means of producing that fruit, we study God's Word diligently and meditate to grasp and arrange our accumulation of truth in its proper order. We begin to keep the Sabbath and perhaps to clean up our language and to tithe as well. We might also set in motion making many other changes in our marriages or our labors on the job.

Nevertheless, even though we may work to make many changes as a direct result of the new information God reveals, none of it will justify us before God. No change of conduct or attitude can erase the stain of our conduct before His calling. We cannot "make up" for what we have done in the past any more than a young man or woman can erase the loss of virginity once it is given away. We may do a multitude of works before baptism, but nothing can erase our past record before God—except the blood of Jesus Christ.

The works done at that time are good, even necessary, to give evidence of belief and repentance. Yet, what carries the day and provides forgiveness and entrance into God's presence is His grace in allowing Christ's sacrifice to prevail before Him.

Sanctification unto Holiness

There comes a time in Christian life, though, when works have a far different and exceedingly more important application. Hebrews 12:14 says, "Pursue peace with all men, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord." Is this not our goal in life? Do we not want to spend all eternity working with and under God and our Lord Jesus Christ in God's Kingdom as He proceeds with His plans to expand his rule throughout all He has made?

Without holiness, we will not be fit for living within that Kingdom. We would be miserable round pegs in square holes, intensely disliking the pattern of life necessary for God's plans to be carried out. We would be as the demons are today, constantly fighting to impede God's work and making everybody else as miserable as possible. In God's mercy, He will not condemn any of us to that. We must be holy as He and His Son are holy. That is why we must work with the Father and Son now by yielding to Their purpose for us.

Sanctification and justification are not the same. They are, however, different processes within the same purpose, and they are definitely related issues. They both begin at the same time: when we are forgiven, justified, and sanctified. Justification has to do with aligning us with the standard of God's law that in turn permits us into God's presence. We will never be any more justified than we are at that moment; justification does not increase as we move through our Christian lives.

Some believe that Jesus Christ lived and died only to provide justification and forgiveness of our sins. However, those who believe this are selling His awesome work short. Notice what Paul writes in Romans 5:6-10 about this:

For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him. For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life.

As wonderful as His work is in providing us with justification, His labors in behalf of our salvation do not end there. Notice that verse 10 says we are "saved by His *life*." Jesus rose from the dead to continue our salvation as our High Priest. God's work of spiritual creation does not end with justification, for at that point we are far from complete. We are completed and saved because of Christ's labor as our Mediator and High Priest only because He is alive.

Sanctification unto holiness continues the process. Hebrews 2:11 states that Jesus is "He who sanctifies," and those of us who have come under His blood are called "those who are sanctified." Note these verses carefully:

» **John 17:19:** And for their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they also may be sanctified by the truth.

» **Ephesians 5:25-26:** Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for it, that He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word.

» **Colossians 1:21-22:** And you, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now He has reconciled in the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy, and blameless, and above reproach in His sight. . . .

» **Titus 2:14:** . . . who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works.

Sanctification has a definite purpose that is different from justification. In one respect, justification—as important as it is—only gets the salvation process started. Sanctification takes a person much farther on the road toward completion. It occurs within the experiences of life generally over the many years of one's relationship with the Father and Son. How long did God work with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, David, and the apostles to prepare them for His Kingdom? By comparison, will our perfection be achieved in just a moment?

Sanctification is the inward spiritual work that Jesus Christ works in us. Notice His promise, made on the eve of His crucifixion, in John 14:18: "I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you." Moments later, when asked by Judas, "Lord, how is it that You will manifest Yourself to us, and not to the world?" (verse 22), Jesus replies, "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him" (verse 23). These clear statements show that Jesus would continue His work with them following His resurrection.

As our High Priest, He continues that work in us after our justification. He not only washes us of our sins by means of His blood, but He also labors to separate us from our natural love of sin and the world. He works to instill in us a new principle of life, making us holy in our actions and reactions within the experiences of life. This makes possible a godly witness before men, and at the same time, prepares us for living in the Kingdom of God.

Walking in the Spirit

If God's only purpose was to save us, He could end the salvation process with our justification. Certainly, His purpose is to save us, but His goal is to save us *with character that is the image of His own*.

Notice Hebrews 6:1: "Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary principles of Christ, let us go on to perfection, not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God." This verse and those immediately following confirm that, at the time of justification, we are not perfect or complete. Justification is an important beginning, but God intends to complete the process of spiritual maturation that He began with our calling. When sanctification begins, our Christian walk truly begins in earnest.

Sanctification, then, is the outcome of God's calling, faith in Jesus Christ, repentance, justification, and our becoming regenerated by God through receiving His Spirit. This combination begins life in the Spirit, as Paul explains in Romans 8:9: "But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His."

At this point in Christian life, the principles of Christianity must be practically applied to everyday life. At this juncture, it might help to recall what righteousness is. Psalm 119:172 defines it succinctly: "My tongue shall speak of Your word, for all Your commandments are righteousness." The apostle John adds to our understanding in I John 3:4: "Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness." Both rectitude and love concisely characterize the same standards, the Ten Commandments, and we are required to labor to perform both.

In several places, John expressly states what the responsibilities of a converted person are:

» **I John 2:29:** If you know that He is righteous, you know that everyone who practices righteousness is born of Him.

» **I John 3:3:** And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.

» **I John 3:9-14:** Whoever has been born of God does not sin, for His seed remains in him; and he cannot [must not] sin, because he has been born of God. In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest: Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother. For this is the message that you heard from the beginning, that we should love one another, not as Cain who was of the wicked one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his works were evil and his brother's righteous. Do not marvel, my brethren, if the world hates you. We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love his brother abides in death.

» **I John 5:1-4:** Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves Him who begot also loves him who is begotten of Him. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep His commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome. For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith.

In these verses, the work of keeping the commandments is plainly shown.

The application of Paul's statement in Ephesians 2:10 is becoming ever clearer. He writes that we are indeed saved by grace through faith. However, he adds, "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them." Sanctification is a process involving a period of intense work: walking in love, keeping the commandments, and overcoming sin and the world, as John's first epistle clearly stipulates. This process within a relationship with the Father and Son brings us to completion.

Evidence of Conversion

Sanctification does not consist only of a lot of talk about religion. Nor does it consist only of spending large amounts of time studying the Bible and commentaries. As helpful as these might be, God also calls for a great deal of action. The apostle John again supplies helpful exhortation: "My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth" (I John 3:18). It could not be stated more clearly that the love of God is an action. Further, Jesus exhorts all His disciples, "If you love Me keep My commandments" (John 14:15). "Keeping" indicates consistent effort to obey as a means of expressing our love, loyalty, and submission to Him.

Paul writes in Romans 5:5, "Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit which was given to us." The indwelling of the Holy Spirit is essential to salvation, and God gives it to those who obey Him (Acts 5:32). As we saw earlier, Paul says in Romans 8:9, "Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His." God gives His Holy Spirit for the very purpose of making one His child. It also allows one to witness on His behalf, to produce the fruit of the Spirit in preparation for His Kingdom, and to glorify Him.

Jesus says in John 15:8, "By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples." Sanctification is the period of our converted lives when God expects us to provide evidence that we are indeed His converted children. In fact, the fruit produced by our works, themselves enabled by God, are the evidence of our conversion. Some things in life are absolute

certainties: Where the fruit of the labors of conversion are, there the Spirit of God will be found. Where those fruits are absent, the people are spiritually dead before God—they lack the life of the Spirit. Put another way, where there is no holy living, there is no Holy Spirit.

The works of sanctification are the only sure sign that one has been called of God and impregnated by His Spirit. Notice something Peter writes on this: "[Christians are] elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ" (I Peter 1:2). Paul adds in II Thessalonians 2:13, "But we are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God from the beginning chose you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth."

He also writes in Ephesians 1:4, ". . . just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love." When Paul saw the Ephesians' attitudes, their manner of life, and the evidence of their conversion, he knew they were part of the elect of God. He could thus honestly write to them with glowing praise. Many more similar verses could be added to these.

Out of ignorance, weakness, or lack of understanding, a person may break some of God's commands. However, anyone who boasts of being one of God's elect while willfully living in sin is only deceiving himself—and his claim may very well be wicked blasphemy.

Thus, because of the works that are performed during sanctification, it will always be a visible condition. As Jesus says in Matthew 7:18-20: "A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Therefore by their fruits you will know them."

God Is Not Unaware

An important principle can be seen in this process of sanctification. Each believer is personally responsible to our Father and our High Priest Jesus Christ for sanctification. Sanctification requires works. These efforts do not pass by Them unnoticed, even though the works possess no power to justify us before Them.

As imperfect as our works are, Hebrews 13:16 reminds us, "But do not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased." In Colossians 3:20, children are urged, "Obey your parents in all things, for this is well pleasing to the Lord." In I John 3:22, John encourages us, "And whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight." God not only requires works, but they also please Him.

As an illustration, the quality of our works can be compared to those of our children. God declares that He looks on the heart (I Samuel 16:7). We look at our children's efforts to please us, and we can readily recognize their poor performance in contrast to someone of consummate skill. Yet, we also see their motives and intentions, not merely the quality of the results. So, despite their flaws, we are pleased. In many instances, God sees us in a similar way.

It is a great blessing that it is this way because, without holiness, no one will see the Lord. During sanctification, the works with which God is pleased work to produce holiness. We must present God with evidence of the singleness of our hearts by making strong efforts to submit to Him, glorify Him, overcome sin, and bring forth much fruit.

If anything is certain about the future, there is a judgment according to works for all who live and die:

» **Matthew 16:27:** For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works.

» **John 5:28-29:** Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.

» **Romans 14:11-12:** For it is written: "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to Me, and every tongue shall confess to God." So then each of us shall give account of himself to God.

» **II Corinthians 5:10:** For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.

» **Revelation 2:23:** I will kill her children with death. And all the churches shall know that I am He who searches the minds and hearts. And I will give to each one of you according to your works.

» **Revelation 20:12-13:** And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books. The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to his works.

What an impressive selection of verses on this subject, and there are yet more! How can anyone who says he believes the Bible claim that works are not required of the Christian when God emphatically declares that they are required of us, even though they do not justify us before Him?

The truth is plain. If a Christian does not work, there will be nothing for God to judge and thus no evidence the person is prepared for His Kingdom. God will not give him salvation because there will be nothing to verify that he belongs there. The lack of evidence proves that he does not belong there! Such a one is not a son of God. A faith that does not work is dead (James 2:17, 20, 26). God is the God of the living, and according to James 2:22, faith is perfected, brought to completion, by works. Sanctification is necessary as a witness to the Christian's character as he passes before the judgment seat of Christ.

Sanctification and Living in God's Kingdom

Do we not all desire to be in the Kingdom of God? Certainly, we must if we are at all impressed with the glory to which God has called us. However, have we considered deeply whether we would enjoy being there, should we be given that privilege? God's Kingdom will be a holy place inhabited by holy people. Is it not apparent that those in God's Kingdom will have spent a great deal of time being prepared, trained, and formed and shaped for living there?

The concept of deathbed repentance and absolution is a lie palmed off by Satan. Likewise false is the belief in a purgatory following death, in which a person prepares for living in paradise. These are

nowhere found in Scripture, nor is the idea that one needs *only* to be justified through Christ's blood. If these things were so, Romans 5:9-10 would not declare:

Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him. For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life.

The false concepts above do not take into consideration that God's purpose includes more than just atoning for our sins through Christ's blood. God's purpose includes the work of Jesus Christ as our High Priest, perfecting our character by means of living in us through His Spirit (John 14:18-23). It is our High Priest, Jesus, who intercedes in our behalf (Romans 8:26-27). As Head of the church, He inspires and corrects us, and He gives us gifts to fulfill our responsibilities (Ephesians 4:7). He labors to create in us a clean heart, purified and in the character image of the Father (II Corinthians 3:17-18).

We need to be sanctified as well as justified. Sanctification requires the works of submission to and cooperation with Almighty God to bring to completion His purpose for us. King David writes in Psalm 16:11, "You will show me the path of life; in Your presence is fullness of joy; at Your right hand are pleasures evermore"—a brief snapshot of what life will be like in the Kingdom of God. No one can be happy where he is not in his element. An unsanctified person would not find God's Kingdom congenial to his tastes and character. Being there would be a condemnation rather than a blessing.

Ephesians 4 and Works

Most of us realize that the unity of the church of God courses through the book of Ephesians as a general theme. Paul illustrates the church as a complete body of which Jesus, though in heaven, is the Head, and the elect here on earth comprise the rest of it. Early on, Paul declares how God has planned the organization of His purpose from the very beginning, determining whom He would call, give His Spirit to, and perfect as His children.

In Ephesians 4, the apostle begins to clarify our Christian responsibilities regarding works. He appeals to us in verse 1 to make every effort to live a manner of life that measures up to the magnificence of our high calling. He then makes sure we understand that we must carry out our responsibilities in humility, kindness, and forbearance as we strive to maintain doctrinal accord in purity.

He explains that Christ has given each of us gifts to meet our responsibilities in maintaining the unity of God's church. Foremost among these gifts are teachers who will work to equip us for service in the church and eventually in the Kingdom. This same process will enable us to grow to completion, to mature, no longer wavering in our loyalties, certain in the direction of our lives, and not deceived by the craftiness of men.

With that foundation, the "therefore" in verse 17 draws our focus to the practical applications necessary to meet the standards of the preceding spiritual concepts. We must not conduct our lives as the unconverted do. They are blinded to these spiritual realities and so conduct life in ignorance, following the lusts of darkened minds.

Because we are being educated by God, the standards of conduct are established by His truths and are therefore exceedingly higher. We must make every effort to throw off the works of carnality and

strive to acquire a renewed mind through diligent, continuous effort so that we can be created in the image of God in true righteousness and holiness (verse 24).

In verses 25-29, Paul moves even further from generalities to clear, specific works that we must do. We must speak truth so that we do not injure another through lies, as well as to maintain unity. Because deceit produces distrust, unity cannot be maintained if lying occurs. We must not allow our tempers to flare out of control, for they serve as an open door for Satan to create havoc.

We must be honest, earning our way so that we are prepared to give to others who are in need. We must be careful that what we speak is not only true but also edifying, imparting encouragement, empathy, sympathy, exhortation, and even gentle correction when needed.

In verse 30 is a brief and kind reminder that, in doing our works we must never forget that we owe everything to our indwelling Lord and Master. We must make every effort to be thankful, acknowledging Him as the Source of all gifts and strengths, enabling us to glorify Him through our works.

In the final two verses of the chapter, Paul delineates specific responsibilities concerning our attitudes toward fellow Christians within personal relationships.

This brief overview of just one chapter shows clearly how much works enter into a Christian's life as practical requirements that cannot be passed off as unnecessary. How else will a Christian glorify God? How else will he grow to reflect the image of God? How else will he fulfill God's command to choose life (Deuteronomy 30:19) except by faithfully doing those works that lead to life?

Through the whole process of sanctification, the Christian will make constant use of two additional works: daily prayer and Bible study, which must be combined with his efforts to obey God. No one who is careless about performing these works can expect to make progress growing in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ during sanctification.

Why? Without them, he will have no relationship with either the Father or the Son, and thus will not be enabled to achieve the required works. They are the Source of the powers that make it possible for us to do the works God has ordained. If we do not follow through on these two works, we will surely hear ourselves called "wicked and lazy" and be cast into "outer darkness" where there is "weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matthew 25:24-30).

More to come.